

“Three Defining Moments”
Isaiah 6: 1-8/ Mark 9: 14-24
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In my **adolescence** and **young adulthood**--the years of **high school** and **college** (for **me**, at least)--I **experienced** (what I’m calling in **this** sermon): “Three Defining Moments.” **Each** of which taught me something **important** about being “a Christian”: 1) being “a Christian” **isn’t** being a “celebrity”; 2) being “a Christian” **isn’t** particularly “entertaining”; and 3) being “a Christian” **isn’t** “having all the answers.”

1. Here’s the “**first** one.” From the time I first started, as a little boy, “playing catch” or “shooting baskets” with my dad in the backyard, I dreamed of being a “great athlete”--like those **before** me--in the town where “**I** grew up,” for which “**our** town” was “noted” (for its “great athletes”). **Indeed**, in **my** “family” and “school” and “community” (and even “at church”)--“sports” was a **big deal**. It’s true. As a “youngster,” I even “heard **sermons** preached” on what a “great athlete” **Jesus** must have been. Which doesn’t seem **likely**--at least when you “read the Bible.” **Unlike**, for example, **Samson** or **Saul** or **David**--such “**tragic** figures” in scripture--who **were**, apparently, “great athletes” (at least when you “read the Bible”).

By the time I was in “**high school**,” I had grown **big** and **strong** and **fast** enough, was “**coordinated** enough,” and could “**jump** high enough” to have begun to “**realize** my dream.” I had made “all-conference” and “all-state” teams; had “**college** coaches” **recruiting me** to “play **football**, or **basketball**” at “**their** school,” and “professional **baseball** scouts” talking to me about “being drafted” by “**their** team.” My mother had compiled quite a “scrapbook” of “newspaper articles” describing my “achievements” on this or that “track” or “field” or “court” or “diamond.” I was even being “interviewed” on “radio” and “television.”

Eventhough I was merely a “big-a-duck” in an awfully “little puddle”--**I had**, nonetheless, achieved “**some** notoriety” (for my “**athletic** accomplishments”). Which, **unfortunately**, I had been “taught” to “believe” had “**too much** to do” with **what it means** to be “a Christian.” As though God, somehow, “likes people **more**” the “better they **do**” in (**and** with) their lives. And, of course, in “**those** days” **my** “life” revolved around at least “**some** kind of **ball**.”

But then “one night”--during a “**football** game”--I suffered a serious “knee injury” (from which I would **never** “fully **recover**”). **Just that fast**--“**my** career” (as a “successful **athlete**”); not to **mention**, the “**celebrity** status” that “goes **with** it” (at least, here **in America**; at least, in “the world” where **I** “grew up”)--**just that fast** my “dream” was “torn apart” **ever as much** as was “my **knee**.”

And not that I “**accepted** it” so “readily.” **Hardly**. I even managed to “hang on” for awhile (going to college **on** an “athletic scholarship,” even being “offered” a “contract” to **play** “professional baseball”). My “dream,” however--it had been

“shattered.” Whether I wanted to “accept it,” or **not**: it would **never** be “realized.” And “**somewhere** along the way” of that “painful journey” (called “disappointment”) I began to “re-**think**” what it means to be “a **Christian**.” Not “the **least** of which,” is where (in “the **Gospels**”); where **Jesus** says (that in “**God’s** kingdom,” at least)--that the “greatest” (in “sports,” or **anywhere else**, for **that matter**)--that they **aren’t**. That it **is**, rather, the “least.” That the “first” (or perhaps even the “best”) **aren’t either**. That it is, **instead**, the “last.”

Indeed--during that “tentative, troubling, soul-searching time” (in “**my** life,” at least)--if I began to “learn **anything**” about “what it means to be a **Christian**”--it was **this**. **Despite what** the “mega-preachers” (if you will, the “**celebrity** preachers”) on **television today** claim (or, for **that matter**, how many “movie stars” or “sports heroes,” “business tycoons,” or even “**politicians** give their **testimony**” (in **this** or **that** or **any** church): “being a **Christian**”--it **isn’t** being a “celebrity.” At least “according to **Jesus**.”

2. Here’s the **second** “defining moment”--for **me**, at least. When I was a “college student,” I knew a “campus minister” who **had** been--“**once** upon a time”--quite “charming, witty, and clever.” In fact, he had been something of an “entertainer” (in “**church** circles,” at least). A “colorful after-dinner speaker”: he could “play several different musical instruments”; he could do “magic tricks, tell funny stories, and sing clever, witty songs.” But he had “grown older”--and, when **I** “knew him”--he had started to “lose” some of his “charm, his wit, his cleverness.” Instead of being “humorous” and “entertaining”--even to a “**college** student” of **my age** (at the time)--he seemed rather “shallow” and “superficial”; at times, even “silly.”

And **not** that **I** was, in **any** way, a person of much “depth” or “insight,” nor **hardly** much of a “critical thinker” (in “those days”) **either**. I was pretty “superficial” **myself**; if not a “glad-hander,” a “hail-fellow-well-met.” I had been “leading the singing” in “revival meetings” since I was “a teen-ager”; **I** could **also** play several musical instruments; and **I** was, **as well**, frequently asked to “entertain” at “church functions” (“sweetheart banquets, youth rallies,” etc.--and “getting **paid**” to “do it” (**in fact**, “pretty good money” for a “**high** school, or “**college** kid”)--the “**same** kind” of “entertaining” **I also did** for “business and professional groups, civic and social clubs”). In **other words**, **I too** had “experienced the church” (of **all places**)--and “what it means to be a Christian”--I’d “come to see it,” **primarily**, on “social” (even “entertaining”) terms.

But it had started to “scare me.” **Particularly**, when I “looked at” my “role model”--the “campus minister” I’ve **just described**. Because **he was** a “good person” (and a “sincere **Christian**,” at that). **He had** qualities of “depth, of insight, and intelligence.” **However**, he had **not** “developed” those qualities. He had, **instead**, “spent too much time” on the “light stuff,” the “fun stuff,” the “entertaining” and “social stuff” (when he was “younger”). And **now**--that he was “older”--what had **once** been his “strength”: it had become, **instead** (and “tragically so”); it had become his most glaring “weakness.”

In that “defining moment”--a “process” **involving**, in fact, “several years” in “**my**

life,” at least--I began to **realize** that “being a Christian” **also meant** “growing up.” That what is “normative” (in terms of “moral and spiritual development”) for a “**20-year-old**” **isn’t**, necessarily, “appropriate” for a “**50-year-old**.” Which meant that **I** needed to spend “**more time**” engaged in more “thoughtful” and “reflective” pursuits; that **I had** some “serious studying” to do: lest I “end up” **becoming** (in “**later years**”) merely a “caricature” of a “shallow, superficial” Christian; just another “lightweight”--however “clever, witty, **or** winsome.” As if “the church” needed **me** (or **anyone else**, for that matter) “contributing” **any further** to “dumbing it down” (the church); to “dumbing down **the church**.”

“Being a **Christian**”--in case you “didn’t know”--it **isn’t** particularly “entertaining.” **As in**, for example, our “Old Testament lesson” today--the prophet **Isaiah’s** “encounter with God” (**in fact**, what “the **Bible** says” **worship** is)--where Isaiah declares: “**Woe is me**, for I am **lost**; I am **unclean**, and I live in the midst **of** such uncleanness.”

Even if “the church” **is** (for **too many**) merely another “**social club**”; or for **that matter**, that “**popular, cultural Christianity**” (the kind you see “on **television**” today, if **not** even “in too many **churches**”); that **it is**, if **anything**, “entertaining”: that is **hardly** “what it means” to be “a **Christian**”; much **less**, what “the church” is meant to be. At least when you “read the Bible.”

3. Here’s “the **last**” of my “defining moments” (at least “the ones I’m “revealing” **today**). When I was a “junior in college”--the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (on campus)--they “sponsored” a “debate” entitled “Is Christianity Credible?” This “debate” was “loudly promoted” (**throughout** the university; in fact, a “large **state** university”), and when the “time for it” to convene **arrived**, the “auditorium” where it was held was “packed” (there was “standing room” only).

I had “**gone** to the debate” with my friend, **John Crenshaw**. He and I actually “sang in a barbershop quartet” together, and we “**both** belonged” to the “same church.” Unlike **myself**--a gregarious, **out-going extrovert**--John was a quiet, reserved fellow; in fact, rather “shy”--yet **every bit** as “**pious** a little Christian boy” as **I was**. John went on, **later**, to “earn a doctorate” in **mathematics**, and has--for many years--taught “computer science” at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green.

As for “the debaters” that night--Inter-Varsity had “brought in” a “fundamentalist professor” (from “Covenant Presbyterian Seminary” in St. Louis) to “argue **for**” the “credibility **of** Christianity.” However, they had had some “difficulty” **finding someone** to “debate” this gentleman (on the “**negative** side”). At the “last minute,” however, they had “secured the services” of **Dr. Bill Harris** (a “professor” in the “**philosophy** department” **in** “the university”). Dr. Harris was a “**crippled** fellow”--the “victim” of **some** insidious “childhood illness”--he had this “twisted little body.” And eventhough he was, **himself**, “a **Quaker**” (a deeply “thoughtful” and “**penetrating** Christian”)--who **taught** “Philosophy of Religion” (**in** “the philosophy department”)--he “agreed” to “play the role” of the “skeptic,” the “non-believer” **in** this “debate” **with** a “Christian

fundamentalist.” In **other words**, someone for whom “the Bible” is merely a “collection” of “theological” and “ethical **propositions.**” As **against**, what “the Bible” **really is**--a “magnificent” (and just as “truthful”) **story** of “God’s **own** passionate struggle” (**first**, in the “life of ancient Israel”; and **finally** [and **most fully**], in the “person and work” of **Jesus**, “the **Christ**” [the “ultimate fulfillment” of Israel; **indeed**, the “**Savior** of the **whole world**”)--what “the Bible” **really is**: the “story” of God’s **own** “passionate struggle” to “redeem,” not only “fallen **humanity**,” but “**all** of creation.”

What “emerged,” of course (**in that** “debate”), was the “irony” of the situation--in that the “fundamentalist”--naturally, **he** had “**all** the answers.” He was as “cock-sure”--displaying even a kind of “arrogance”--as **Professor Harris** was “humble,” in the way he “questioned” and “struggled with” what the “fundamentalist” asserted so “absolutely.” **Indeed**, as “the debate” **continued**--the “skeptic” (the “**non**-believer”)--he “proceeded” (ironically **enough**) to literally “dis-arm” the so-called “Christian.”

Such that when John Crenshaw and I finally **left** “the debate” (**at its** “conclusion”) and began “walking across campus--**neither** of us “had anything to say” **to** “one another.” Yet, in “our **silence**”--a lot **was** “being said.” We had both “**gone** to the debate” to “see the Christian” **win** “the argument.” **However**, what was “obvious”--at least **to us** (“good little Christian boys” **that we were**)--what was “so **obvious**”: was that it **hadn’t** “turned **out** that way.” **Hardly**. In fact, **finally**, we just “**looked** at each other” (John and I)--without “saying a word” (which **was**, of course, **more** than “**any** words” could have “**ever** said”)--having “realized” (**each** of us) that “the guy” who “claimed” **not to be** “a Christian”; that **he may have**, afterall, been “**more** of a Christian” than “the fellow” who seemed so smugly “sure” and “certain” he “**was** one.”

Years later--when John and I **did**, finally, “talk about” what we had “experienced,” having “witnessed” (**together**) that “Is Christianity Credible?” debate (back when we were “juniors in **college**”)--we both “agreed.” That it “**had** been,” **indeed**, a “defining moment” in “**our** lives” (**as** Christians). The night John Crenshaw and I **realized** (perhaps “more **profoundly**” than **ever before**): that being “a Christian” **doesn’t mean** “having all the answers.”

Not **unlike**, for example, the “anxious father” (in our “**Gospel** lesson” today), who “cries out” (the Bible says); **indeed**, he “cries out” **to** Jesus: “Lord, I **believe**--help thou my **un**-belief.”

In **other words**, it’s “**not** what I **know**” (what I’m so “**sure** of”); it **is**, rather, “my “**un**-belief” (my “**un**-certainty”; where I “question” and “struggle”). **That’s where** I “need **your** help,” Jesus. **That’s what** I’m “trusting” to **you**--to “**your** mercy, **your** forgiveness, **your** understanding--indeed, your **grace**.”

It’s called “faith”--“**Christian** faith”--at least when you “read the Bible.” For “**Christ’s** sake”--to the “glory of **God**.” Amen.